

The Impact of Standards-Based Accountability

Introduction

Standards-based accountability systems have shaped public schools in every state for the better part of two decades and in some states, even longer. The goal of these systems has been to ensure that public schools are helping all students meet high academic standards, regardless of their backgrounds. But have accountability systems delivered on these lofty, admirable goals?

Now that we are on “pause” with state testing due to a global pandemic,¹ it’s worth stepping back to assess what has worked well and what hasn’t in the nearly 20 years since No Child Left Behind (NCLB). When we assess the component parts of standards-based accountability, what have been the most successful? What parts haven’t worked as well as originally intended? How have those successes and challenges led to political support or opposition for accountability over time?

The answers to these questions come at a critical moment for students across the country, many of whom are facing massive learning losses in the wake of the disruption to schooling.² Policymakers will need to act quickly to address this challenge. The hard-earned lessons from decades of work on school accountability can provide a path for them to adapt education policy to our new reality while continuing to support higher and more equitable student achievement. Failure to do so will very likely lead to long-lasting negative consequences for the very students accountability systems were designed to protect.

This brief will assess the successes and challenges of standards-based accountability, the relative strength of its component parts, and the evolution of public and political support to sustain these policies.

This brief is part of a four-part series examining the past, present, and future of modern school accountability systems. With the dual forces of the COVID-19 pandemic and the national call to action on racial inequity, the question of how we should measure and hold schools accountable for the impact they have on students is more urgent than ever. Please visit the Bellwether website by [clicking here](#) for more details and links to the other briefs in this series.

Impact of Standards-Based Accountability on Student Outcomes

Standards-based accountability policies have contributed to measurable improvements in student performance. When examining National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data pre- and post-NCLB, Thomas Dee and Brian Jacob found significant gains for students in fourth- and eighth-grade math, particularly for low-income, Black, and Latino students, as well as for students at the lowest performance levels.³ Other studies confirm that those findings were not an anomaly: Contrary to widespread perception, NCLB-era accountability policies produced meaningful improvements in student achievement, particularly for traditionally underserved student groups.⁴

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Accountability systems have also helped boost non-test-based metrics like graduation rates. Since the implementation of NCLB, the percentage of adults age 18 to 24 with a high school diploma or GED increased from 85 percent in 2001 to 93 percent in 2016 — gains that are significant even after discounting for potential lowering of standards through initiatives like “credit recovery” programs.⁵

While these gains are substantial, the impact of standards-based accountability has not fully lived up to its initial promise. The improvement of student performance in math has not been matched with similar gains in reading. And student achievement has stalled over the past decade, with growing gaps between high- and low-performing students.⁶

These uneven results suggest that the accountability policies of recent years alone are insufficient to consistently drive the kind of behavioral change intended to achieve ambitious academic goals for all students in all schools. For example, despite systematic efforts to clarify and raise expectations for students, many students — particularly low-income students and students of color — still don’t have access to rigorous instruction.⁷ And even with recent improvements in teacher preparation programs, nearly half of elementary teacher preparation programs don’t prepare teachers to teach reading based on scientifically backed principles.⁸ While accountability systems don’t themselves dictate things like curricular choices or teacher training, they are meant to create incentives that influence those choices and systems.

The story of standards-based accountability’s impact on student outcomes is complex. In order to better understand why we’ve seen progress in some areas and not in others, we need to understand how the component parts of standards-based accountability contribute to these outcomes.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Accountability

In the first brief of this series, “[The Historical Roots and Theory of Change of Modern School Accountability](#),” we identified three foundational elements to standards-based accountability systems: academic standards, assessments aligned to those standards, and other indicators of student and school performance. These pieces not only define learning goals (standards) – they also produce quantifiable data used to support different mechanisms of accountability (assessments and other indicators).

The accountability systems built on these elemental components contribute to a clear theory of change: setting rigorous expectations, assessing all students annually to see if they’re meeting those targets, and establishing meaningful incentives and consequences based on performance to drive improvement in outcomes. Through a combination of transparency (making information available to the public and putting it into the hands of those empowered to act) plus interventions in chronically low-performing schools, these systems were intended to drive systemic improvement in school performance.

Each of these leverage points in the accountability theory of change has demonstrated strengths and weaknesses, often linked to shifting levels of public and political support. Examining each component of the theory of change can help leaders better understand what’s worked and what hasn’t.

Holding All Students to Rigorous Expectations

Setting clear, rigorous learning expectations for all students is essential to the theory of action behind school accountability, but state learning standards have not always been rigorous or coherent enough for educators to translate them into quality curriculum and instruction. While states have made progress on this front in the past decade, more work remains to ensure that learning standards lead to better and more equitable student outcomes.

There was a push to develop voluntary national standards under the George H.W. Bush administration, but after that effort failed and through the early years of the NCLB era, the development and implementation of learning standards was led by individual states with substantial federal support.⁹ This led to a proliferation of standards that – according to the Thomas B. Fordham Institute – were decidedly mediocre, with a few stellar examples and many instances of weak standards.¹⁰

That all changed after Race to the Top and the NCLB waivers of the Obama administration, which strongly encouraged states to adopt “college and career ready standards” like the Common Core. That push led many states to adopt the Common Core standards in reading and math. While some states subsequently retreated from the “Common Core” label after political backlash over fears of a quasi-nationalization of standards, most states – even those that technically “repealed” the Common Core – have higher standards now than they did in the mid-2000s.¹¹

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The federal pressure to improve state learning standards managed to also bring greater consistency among states' standards. Forty-five states agreed to adopt the Common Core standards in 2010, and even after a majority of those states revised or repealed the standards, most states retained key elements of the Common Core in their updated standards.¹²

The near-universal shift to clearer, more rigorous learning standards in reading and math is a success of the standards-based accountability movement. But while clearer and higher learning standards in these subjects can create the conditions for more widespread student success, they haven't been powerful enough on their own to ensure equitable access to a quality education.

Standards must be operationalized through high-quality curriculum and instructional plans that teachers use in the classroom, but evidence suggests that standards don't automatically translate into better instruction. A recent RAND survey of teachers found that only a third of math teachers and just over 10 percent of reading teachers were using high-quality instructional materials aligned to state standards.¹³ An investigation by American Public Media revealed that many schools continue to use flawed approaches to teaching reading.¹⁴ Most alarmingly, an analysis from TNTP found that low-income students and students of color still have less access to high-quality, rigorous curriculum and instruction.¹⁵

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Efforts to adopt strong learning standards in reading and math may have also come at the expense of attention to other subject areas. Fordham Institute analyses of state standards for science¹⁶ and U.S. history¹⁷ showed that the quality of these standards varies significantly, with mediocrity the norm. A narrowed focus on reading and math standards can deprive students of a well-rounded education if other subjects aren't explicitly emphasized.

The efforts to develop rigorous standards have a history of appealing to political centrists, but they have detractors on both sides of the political aisle. Conservatives have a long history of opposing a federal role in K-12 education: Reagan campaigned on abolishing the Department of Education — a call that was echoed by Republicans through the 1990s and by several Republican presidential candidates in 2016.¹⁸ Additionally, in 2016 the Republican party platform praised states that abandoned the Common Core.¹⁹ In contrast, liberals have opposed standards for forcing a one-size-fits-all approach and thus limiting teacher autonomy.^{20 21} Despite these long-held positions against federal involvement in standards, the concept of rigorous learning standards still has a 67 percent approval rating among Republicans — nearly identical to Democrats' 66 percent approval.²²

Administering Annual, Statewide Assessments

Unlike the often-politicized process of developing and adopting learning standards, assessment development is typically contracted out to third-party vendors with technical expertise and then administered by state departments of education. Given the complicated nature of administering assessments across more than 100,000 schools nationwide, states have a solid track record of delivering on a central purpose: producing reliable and comparable data on every student's progress on state learning standards. There are some instances where technology has failed²³ and some rare but well-documented instances of coordinated cheating,²⁴ but the vast majority of annual testing cycles have gone off without incident. The result is the most granular, reliable, and comparable data the public has about student academic performance.

Data produced by annual assessments of student performance also provide critical data on student subgroups. The disaggregated data produced by current assessment systems ensures that outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and other racial/ethnic groups of students; students with disabilities; English learners; and other traditionally underserved subgroups, and any gaps in opportunity those outcomes reveal, cannot be suppressed. This is a key feature of modern assessment systems — a feature that would be compromised if policymakers abandon annual testing in favor of grade span testing or sampling techniques, which explicitly prevent the testing of every student, every year.²⁵

The Effects of State Assessments on Teachers and Teaching

Producing more reliable and granular data on student achievement isn't the only priority for states to consider. For student achievement results to be usable for teachers and educators, the test results need to be timely and minimally disruptive to the educational process.

Two criticisms of annual assessment emerge around the time schools and students spend taking standardized tests and perceptions of the impact standardized tests have on how classroom time is used in general. On the first, however, despite claims that tests take up too much time that could otherwise be spent on instruction, a survey of large urban districts across the country found that students spend 6-9 hours on state testing over the course of a school year, depending on the state and grade level. Even after adding other state tests and formative assessments required by the district, district leaders reported that just over 2 percent of classroom time is used to administer state and local assessments.²⁶ However, while time on testing itself may be minimal, that does not include the time teachers spend *preparing* for testing.

The second critique — that the focus on reading and math leads schools and teachers to reduce attention and access to other subjects and opportunities, such as science, social studies, and the arts, in favor of more intensive time on tested subjects — is also unsupported by data. A survey of first-through fourth-grade teachers conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that they reported spending fewer hours on English instruction and about the same in math in 2015-16 as

compared to teachers pre-NCLB.²⁷ Additionally, high school students are receiving a more balanced, more rigorous curriculum than ever before. As of 2009, the last year for which we have comparable national data, public high school graduates accumulated 5.6 more academic credits than their peers did in 1982, with the largest gains in math, science, foreign language, and history/social studies.²⁸ Moreover, the percentage of graduates completing a well-rounded curriculum of four years of English, three years of math, three years of social studies, three years of science, and two years of foreign language soared from 10 percent in 1982 to 62 percent in 2009.²⁹ These data are not granular enough to know if students are spending more time within subjects on low-level test-taking strategies as opposed to academic content, but they do indicate that students and teachers are spending more time on academic subjects overall.

Still, even if the potential downsides to state tests are limited, that does not mean they are realizing their true potential. On that question, it is worth noting that many states fail to deliver assessment results in a timely manner. In 2019, most states released their statewide assessment results to the public in the early fall after students took them in the spring, although some states, including New Jersey, released them even later.³⁰ School officials may have access to these data earlier than the public, but states with significant delays in data constrain the ability of other parties — like parents and advocates — from using assessment data before a new school year begins to inform what supports or policy changes may be needed to address specific student needs.

Assessments as Measures of Rigorous Expectations

In theory, state tests are designed to set a clear, rigorous expectation for what all students know and can do. This is different than the underlying standards themselves. While the standards identify the concepts that must be mastered at each grade level, states set “cut scores” to determine how many questions a student needs to answer correctly to demonstrate proficiency.

States are free to set their own proficiency cut scores on tests and have, in the past, had an incentive to lower the bar to create an illusion of student success. While this was a problem in the early years of NCLB, state proficiency standards in reading and math are higher today and are more similar to one another than they were in the past. For example, in 2007, 29 states had fourth-grade “proficiency” cut scores aligned with the lowest NAEP performance level, but that number had fallen to only three states by 2017.³¹ This means that while state cut scores for proficiency are not perfectly comparable, they are generally more rigorous and more similar now than ever before.

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But efforts to bring more consistency and comparability to state assessments have also been politically fraught. The widespread adoption of the Common Core standards presented an opportunity to develop common assessments for states that would not only be higher-quality and

lower-cost than state-developed assessments, but could also provide a common point of comparison of student performance across state lines.³² While 45 states initially signaled their intent to join the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), Smarter Balanced, or both of the major Common Core-aligned testing consortia, state participation numbers started to fall once testing began. That decline was largely driven by states not wanting to cede control over cut scores to a national consortium, political concerns over ties to the Obama Administration, and the linkage of the assessments to new teacher evaluation systems.³³ And as of the 2018-19 school year, only 15 states and Washington, D.C., still used PARCC or Smarter Balanced as their state's assessments.³⁴

The backlash to the Common Core, testing, and teacher evaluations had other political consequences as well. A wave of testing “opt outs” spread across some states, with 18 percent of New York students choosing not to take the state assessment in the spring of 2018.³⁵ Despite generic support among voters for strong learning standards, opposition to the Common Core brand and increased calls to limit the amount of standardized testing led state legislators to introduce 426 bills to limit testing in 44 states in 2019,³⁶ and the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party, former Vice President Joe Biden, has stated that if elected president, he will end the use of standardized testing in schools.³⁷

However, despite the divisive politics surrounding assessment, the annual testing of all students remains an essential component of accountability systems' theory of action. Without reliable data on school outcomes, states and districts would struggle to target resources and supports to schools with the greatest needs. And abandoning testing raises the question of how transparent reporting of student outcomes — particularly for traditionally underserved subgroups — can occur, which threatens to return our school system to a time when inequity in student outcomes could easily go undocumented.

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Establishing Meaningful Incentives and Consequences Based on Performance

The final element in the accountability theory of change includes the incentives and consequences tied to performance and how they drive behavior. Current state accountability systems include two primary mechanisms:

- Indirect accountability driven by the impact of transparent school and student performance data
- Direct accountability achieved through formal identification and intervention by districts and states in low-performing schools

Gains in transparency into the performance of schools and students, particularly into disparities in outcomes for traditionally underserved students, is one of the biggest wins of modern assessment and accountability. However, the overall impact of standards-based accountability on driving dramatic improvement in student outcomes and in equity is decidedly mixed.

Transparent School and Student Performance Data

The availability of transparent and disaggregated student performance data is an underappreciated, but critical mechanism of accountability for schools. Simply making data available has no direct impact on how schools behave, but it serves as fuel for parents, advocates, and researchers to better understand how well schools are serving students.

Prior to wide availability of school performance data, the inequities between and within schools only surfaced through anecdote and observation. But once states began providing data that quantified the performance of different student subgroups, parents and advocates gained a powerful tool. Armed with data, they are now able to engage with school and district leaders on specific issues affecting student performance. Data from state accountability systems has also helped fuel a new wave of high-quality research on education policies and practices.³⁸ In cities where parents have access to public school choice, performance data can help parents navigate their options more clearly, particularly when supported by third-party tools and resources for understanding school quality data created by organizations like EdNavigator,³⁹ Great MN Schools,⁴⁰ and others.

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The demand for transparent school performance information is strong, but transparency alone can have limitations and even negative effects. Despite all of the data on school and student performance that are publicly available, parents tend to rely more on teacher-generated report cards to understand their child's performance, which results in 90 percent of parents believing their students are on grade level when actual proficiency rates are much lower.⁴¹

Furthermore, school performance information provided by third-party organizations like GreatSchools.org can be popular with parents — traffic to the site totaled about 43 million unique visitors in 2018 alone⁴² — but it can lead to negative effects. Some research has shown that third-party school rating websites like GreatSchools that rely on student proficiency rates may unintentionally accelerate housing segregation, especially if the underlying metrics have a closer tie to student demographics than the school's actual contributions to student learning.⁴³

The availability of transparent data on school and student performance has been relatively uncontroversial compared to other aspects of accountability systems — partly because of their indirect impact on schools' behavior and more so because of data's powerful role in addressing systemic inequities. The reporting of performance disaggregated by subgroups along income, race, English language learner status, and special education status was championed by conservatives and liberals at the dawn of the NCLB era and continued through the passage of ESSA, which required reporting on three new student subgroups: homeless students, military-connected students, and students in foster care.⁴⁴

Transparent data that is publicly available and disaggregated by student subgroups is an essential and broadly supported mechanism of accountability and equity. While its impacts may be more indirect on schools, it provides an important lens for the public into how well schools are serving students — one that is even more essential as learning systems are disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

School Ratings and Identification for Intervention

After testing, the most prominent mechanisms of standards-based accountability systems are school ratings and identification for intervention. Those systems serve two formal functions: to assign each public school with a categorical label that reflects its performance and to identify schools with low overall or subgroup performance for additional supports and interventions.⁴⁵

These systems have had at least some positive effect on student outcomes. Researchers have found that creating clear, public labels of school performance have caused measurable improvements in student outcomes.^{46 47} Additionally, research on New York City's A-F letter grades found that their positive effect dissipated after the city stopped reporting the letter grades and simply released the raw data.⁴⁸ However, the effects of these systems seemed to plateau after a few years of being established.⁴⁹ This suggests that setting clear performance goals for schools may have some initial effects, but it may not be enough to drive continual improvement in student outcomes.

Clear, public labels of school performance have caused measurable improvements in student outcomes.

The plateau effect may be due to how the incentives of formal accountability systems affect educators' focus and pacing. Since these systems explicitly assess specific grade-level learning standards, educators may focus more narrowly on the standards themselves rather than using them as a framework by which they can design and deliver a broad and deep curriculum.⁵⁰ If school rating systems or identification criteria place too much of an emphasis on mastery of grade-level content versus growth toward mastery, that can also create unintended incentives for schools to pay more attention to students on the cusp of meeting proficiency targets. That can push teachers and schools to pay less attention to the needs of gifted students and students who haven't yet mastered content from previous grades.⁵¹

School rating systems are also politically tenuous. State policymakers have found it easier to offer a "dashboard" of indicators of school performance rather than to land on a single rating of a school's quality. Those dynamics may be particularly acute in the current environment as all schools struggle to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as we discuss further in "[Assessment and Accountability in the Wake of COVID-19](#)," the COVID-19 school closures have introduced and exacerbated learning gaps across schools. A response that treats all schools equally would be the equivalent of accepting the inevitable growth of already-large achievement gaps.

Interventions in Low-Performing Schools

In addition to public pressure through transparent data and reporting, accountability systems can also impose specific interventions in low-performing schools. Both NCLB and the Obama Administration's School Improvement Grant (SIG) program attempted to create a set of required interventions in low-performing schools. Those attempts failed to have their desired effect — causing political blowback in the process — and Congress scaled back the specificity and scope of federally imposed interventions under ESSA in 2015. Under ESSA, the federal government still requires interventions in low-performing schools, but states and districts are free to determine what interventions and supports to provide.

Under NCLB, Congress drafted a list of interventions that increased in severity the longer the school failed to meet annual performance targets (known as “Adequate Yearly Progress,” or AYP). The interventions were the same for all schools, regardless of the reason why the school was identified for improvement or any contextual factors. Moreover, the “tougher” reforms included an option for schools to pursue their own “major restructuring” effort, and the vast majority of schools chose that option. The end result was that many schools were identified for interventions, but the specific interventions never produced positive outcomes for students at scale.⁵²

In response, the Obama administration's \$7 billion SIG program attempted to limit the number of schools identified for turnaround, while imposing stricter consequences in those schools. Under the program, schools could select one of four turnaround approaches:

- **Transformation:** Districts replace school leadership and implement other reforms designed to improve teacher effectiveness, instruction, and school climate
- **Turnaround:** Districts replace school leadership and at least half the staff and implement other reforms
- **Restart:** Districts convert low-performing district schools to charter schools
- **Closure:** Districts close the school and transfer students to other district schools

Like under NCLB, the vast majority of SIG schools opted for transformation, the least restrictive model.⁵³ National studies of the SIG program revealed considerable policy churn and teacher turnover at the identified schools, but those changes produced no statistically significant differences on student outcomes overall.⁵⁴

Underneath the national story, however, some states and districts were able to produce measurable improvements in student performance through the SIG program's prescribed turnaround interventions.⁵⁵ Other efforts offer evidence that larger-scale improvements are possible when top-down support is balanced with school-level autonomy. The state takeover of the low-performing Lawrence Public School District in Massachusetts — which blended autonomy for the district with sustained support from the state — produced significant improvement in student performance and is widely held as a model of successful school turnaround.⁵⁶ A similar approach to school turnaround in Tennessee's Innovation Zones also produced student performance gains.⁵⁷

After two decades of formal accountability systems formed by NCLB, altered by SIG, and revamped under ESSA, lawmakers and educators alike may be suffering from accountability fatigue. It would be easy to conclude from this history that it's nearly impossible to reform low-performing schools that don't want to be reformed. Or, others may agree on the diagnosis of under-performing schools and stagnant achievement but favor approaches such as more money for schools, school integration plans, investment in pre-K, teacher professional development, or broader access to market-based solutions like school choice.

The research base suggests a more nuanced takeaway on interventions in low-performing schools. No single intervention is likely to work everywhere, and attempting to force it on unwilling educators will produce more churn than actual improvements. Instead, school turnaround efforts have produced measurable gains for students only in places that engage in serious, dramatic reform efforts that meaningfully alter all or some parts of the school's curriculum, instruction, and staffing.

Re-forming the Coalition for Standards-Based Accountability

The coalition of support for standards-based accountability evolved and grew over time, much like the policies and systems that we see in most accountability systems. Starting with reform-minded elites during the Progressive Era, interest in holding schools accountable for results eventually grew to include both sides of the political aisle, the business community, and state governors. Conservatives' original support for accountability stemmed from their desire to ensure prudent use of public funding; liberals were driven primarily by equity concerns for underserved students; and business leaders and governors saw accountability as a tool to improve the quality of their state's human capital.⁵⁸

While each part of this coalition had different motivations, they all shared a basic belief that schools need to demonstrate that they are effectively educating students from all backgrounds. But in recent years, that coalition began to fracture. Conservative opposition to the Common Core, bipartisan skepticism of testing, and waning desire to assert strong accountability at the state level have served to gradually erode the size and strength of the pro-accountability coalition.

While political support for accountability policies dwindled, policy shifts in the 2010s helped to drive liberals and conservatives away from the center on accountability and closer to the base positions of their respective parties. The Obama administration's push for teacher evaluation systems that included accountability for teachers sparked backlash from unions, who in turn developed organized opposition to the assessment systems that generated the data necessary to run the evaluation systems.⁵⁹ As a result, liberal politicians, who often rely on support from teachers unions, voiced increased skepticism of assessment and accountability in the wake of this struggle.

Meanwhile, conservatives also began to drift away from supporting accountability policies during the Obama years, particularly in response to the push for states to adopt the Common Core standards. Historically, Republicans have opposed a federal role in K-12 education — an orthodoxy that was challenged by both Presidents Bush, with George H.W. Bush seeking to be the “education president” and George W. Bush leading the largest expansion of federal power in education since LBJ with the passage of NCLB. A federal push for states to adopt specific learning standards under President Obama ultimately rekindled Republicans’ opposition to federal involvement on K-12 issues, which had the effect of isolating more moderate Republicans from the increasingly populist base of the party.⁶⁰

In the years since teacher evaluation and Common Core drove wedges between liberal and conservative supporters of accountability, social issues further split what was a fracture into a fissure. Liberal reformers have increasingly aligned their focus on issues of race, justice, and poverty, alienating some conservatives and center-right reformers over questions about how explicitly reformers should focus on race rather than on all American students, a focus many left-leaning reformers believe is essential for addressing inequities.⁶¹ At the same time, the election of President Donald Trump and the appointment of longtime school choice advocate Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education served as a wedge for progressives to isolate left-of-center reformers. Those divisions were particularly pronounced in recent elections in California⁶² and Denver,⁶³ where left-leaning reform-minded candidates faced attacks that tied their agendas to Trump and DeVos.

With the left and right more polarized than ever, is there any hope for a new path forward?

While it is a daunting question, events may force an answer more quickly than expected. The global coronavirus pandemic disrupted K-12 public education to what months ago would have been an unthinkable degree. States have entered a “pause” on assessments for accountability, and there is little consensus on what schooling will look like in the 2020-21 school year. But what is certain is the massive risks to student well-being and academic progress that will come as a consequence of the pandemic and the related economic fallout. As detailed more extensively in “Assessment and Accountability in the Wake of COVID-19,” the projected learning losses are staggering and threaten to drive achievement gaps even wider.⁶⁴ As schools face massive budgetary, educational, and health challenges, there is an increased need for the coalition in support of accountability to rediscover the common ground they once held.

The theory of action underlying accountability systems — setting standards, measuring progress, and applying mechanisms of accountability for outcomes to improve achievement and equity — is as relevant as ever. And since the student progress driven by NCLB-era accountability policies has plateaued, it’s critical that policymakers adapt these core elements of accountability to drive more equitable and improved student performance in the years to come.

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Navigating an uncertain learning landscape will be challenging, but policymakers would do well to keep an equity-minded focus on student outcomes. In order to ensure these students aren't left behind as schools continue educating during a pandemic, policymakers must ensure that accountability systems are adapted and not sidelined during this critical moment for kids.

Accountability is not front-of-mind for many policymakers, rightfully so. Our nation faces serious and unprecedented challenges that deserve their focus. But even as they grapple with the fallout of a pandemic, students can't afford to have their education lost in the shuffle. Their futures will be meaningfully shaped by how policymakers respond in the next year.

As leaders are forced to bridge their partisan divides to address how we respond to a global pandemic, they will also need to reimagine how accountability works in the education sector. The foundational elements and mechanisms of accountability have shown over the course of two decades where they can do well and where they are limited. With students facing a critical juncture in their lives, policymakers ought to apply those lessons to ensure that even in an incredibly difficult environment, we focus on helping all students achieve higher and more equitable levels of success.

Endnotes

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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.